

Package Will Conserve Land and Provide Water Resources to Communities Across New Mexico

Washington, DC – Today, Rep. Ben Ray Luján voted in favor of the Omnibus Land Management Act of 2009, which will conserve thousands of acres of land for future generations and make water resources available to previously underserved communities. Five bills that Rep. Luján introduced were included in the package—including four pieces of legislation that address water availability (Rio Grande Pueblos Irrigation Infrastructure Improvement Act, the Eastern New Mexico Rural Water System Authorization Act, the Navajo-San Juan Indian Water Rights Settlement, and the New Mexico Aquifer Assessment Act) and one piece of legislation that preserves valuable wilderness 40 miles east of Las Vegas, New Mexico (the Sabinoso Wilderness Act). The legislation passed the House by a vote of 285 to 140. The legislation will now go to President Barack Obama's desk.

"New Mexico's natural beauty marked by scenic vistas and natural forests is what makes our state beautiful and unique. Today, Congress made an historic statement to protect our beautiful landscapes and the natural resources contained within them by passing the Omnibus Public Land Management Act," said Rep. Luján. "By passing the Land bill, the House made a commitment to conserving treasured land for the next generation and making water resources available to communities that need it."

Rep. Luján introduced five pieces of legislation included in the Omnibus Bill. Those measures were originally introduced several years ago by Sen. Jeff Bingaman in the Senate and then-Rep. Tom Udall in the House. As chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Sen. Bingaman authored the Omnibus Bill and shepherded it through the Senate.

"Water availability is a critical issue in New Mexico, and these pieces of legislation will provide many communities with stable access to water," said Rep. Luján. "Communities in New Mexico need access to this precious resource, and this legislation will help alleviate the problems they face with water availability and allocation."

The Rio Grande Pueblos Irrigation Infrastructure Improvement Act would allocate federal resources to Indian tribes in New Mexico to assess and repair irrigation infrastructure in order to

help conserve water resources in the area.

The Eastern New Mexico Rural Water System Authorization Act would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to provide financial assistance to the Eastern New Mexico Rural Water Authority for the planning, design, and construction of the Eastern New Mexico Rural Water System.

The Navajo-San Juan Indian Water Rights Settlement would resolve a water dispute that began in 1975 between the state of New Mexico and the Navajo Nation over the resources in the San Juan River. In 2005, a settlement was reached between the state of New Mexico and the Navajo Nation that resolved this dispute. However, it cannot be implemented without legislation that most notably authorizes a series of water infrastructure projects--including creating a water settlement and providing for funds for water resources. The passage of this legislation would resolve the Navajo Nation's claims to the San Juan River, provide the Tribe with an important and long-term water supply, and protect the interests of non-Indian water users in the basin.

The New Mexico Aquifer Assessment Act would authorize the Secretary of Interior to conduct a study on the water resources of New Mexico.

Rep. Luján also introduced the Sabinoso Wilderness Act that would designate approximately 16,000 wilderness acres located 40 miles east of Las Vegas, New Mexico. The land includes a unique and diverse ecosystem that contains vast woodlands and rocky canyons, as well as thriving wildlife and vegetation.

"New Mexico is known as the Land of Enchantment because of our people, beautiful landscapes, clear skies, and fresh air," said Rep. Luján. "The Sabinoso Wilderness embodies the value and beauty of our land. The ecosystem that represents the wilderness is unique to the region and supports diverse wildlife and vegetation—which is why the Sabinoso Wilderness Act is supported by hunters, ranchers, conservationists, and residents who want to preserve the land for future generations. The language will preserve valuable and treasured land, providing the next generation with the opportunity to enjoy it."

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